

**6.** The plight of the neighborhood's abandoned dogs comes to Zeitoun's attention as "a bewilderment, an anger in their cries that cut the night into shards" (93). The next day, he sets out in the canoe and tries to do what he can for animals and people trapped by the flood. How does Zeitoun feel about what he is doing? How does he think about these days after he has been imprisoned (262–64)?

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**7.** Discuss what happens when Zeitoun and the others are forced to get into the boat and are taken into custody. Is it clear why they are being arrested? What assumptions are made about Zeitoun and the other three men (275–87)?

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**8.** Part IV (203–90) tells the story of Zeitoun's imprisonment. Here we learn in great detail how Zeitoun is denied the right to call Kathy, how his injured foot is not attended to, how the other men are beaten, stripped, and starved, how he prays constantly, yet loses hope. What is the impact, as you read, of this narrative?

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**9.** "Zeitoun is a more powerful indictment of America's dystopia in the Bush era than any number of well-written polemics" (Timothy Egan, *New York Times*, August 13, 2009). Would you agree with this statement? Can Zeitoun be read as a contribution to the history of hurricane Katrina and the failure of government to handle the disaster effectively?

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**10.** Discuss Kathy's situation, and her actions once she learns where Zeitoun is. The aftermath is more difficult, and she still suffers from physical and psychological problems that seem to be the result of post-traumatic stress. What was the most traumatic part of her experience, and why (319)?

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**11.** Given that the other men who were imprisoned with Zeitoun were held much longer than he was, and that Nasser lost his life savings, is it surprising that these men were not compensated in any way for their time in prison (320–21)?

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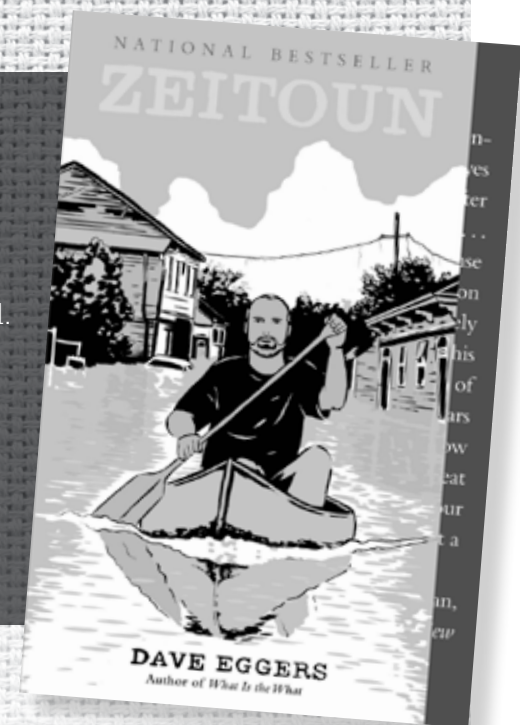
**12.** What is Zeitoun's feeling now about what happened? How does he move forward into the future, as expressed in the book's closing pages (322–25)?

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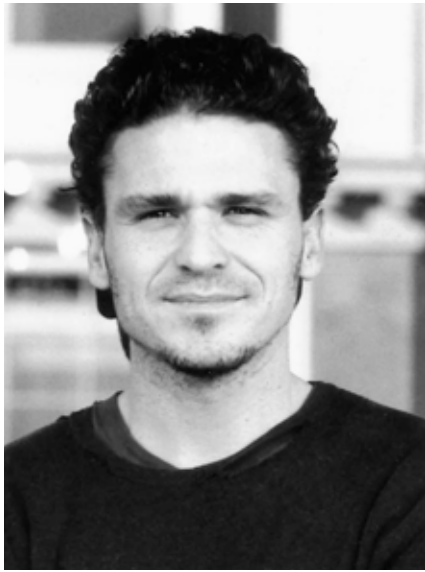
## Discussion Questions

"This is a beautiful book. Zeitoun is a poignant, haunting, ethereal story about New Orleans in peril. Eggers has bottled up the feeling of post-Katrina despair better than anyone else."

— Douglas Brinkley



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**Dave Eggers** is the author of four books, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!*, *How We Are Hungry*, and *What Is the What*. He is the editor of *McSweeney's*, a quarterly magazine and book-publishing company, and is cofounder of 826 Valencia, a network of nonprofit writing and tutoring centers for young people.

His interest in oral history led to his 2004 cofounding of *Voice of Witness*, a nonprofit series of books that use oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world. As a journalist, his work has

appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *The Believer*. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his wife and daughter. (From the publisher.)

Eggers was one of three 2008 TED Prize recipients. His TED Prize wish: for community members to personally engage with local public schools.

Eggers currently teaches writing in San Francisco at 826 Valencia, a nonprofit tutoring center and writing school for children that he cofounded in 2002. Eggers has recruited volunteers to operate similar programs in Los Angeles, New York City, Seattle, Chicago, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, all under the auspices of the nonprofit organization 826 National. In 2006, he appeared at a series of fundraising events, dubbed the *Revenge of the Book-Eaters* tour, to support these programs. The Chicago show, at the Park West theatre, featured *Death Cab for Cutie* frontman Ben Gibbard. Other performers on the tour included Sufjan Stevens, Jon Stewart and David Byrne. In September 2007, the Heinz Foundations awarded Eggers a \$250,000 Heinz award given to recognize “extraordinary achievements by individuals”. The award will be used to fund some of the 826 Valencia writing centers. (From Wikipedia.)

## Book Summary

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a prosperous Syrian-American and father of four, chose to stay through the storm to protect his house and contracting business. In the days after the storm, he traveled the flooded streets in a secondhand canoe, passing on supplies and helping those he could. A week later, on September 6, 2005, Zeitoun abruptly disappeared.

Eggers’s riveting nonfiction book, three years in the making, explores Zeitoun’s roots in Syria, his marriage to Kathy—an American who converted to Islam—and their children, and the surreal atmosphere (in New Orleans and the United States generally) in which what happened to Abdulrahman Zeitoun was possible.

Like *What Is the What*, *Zeitoun* was written in close collaboration with its subjects and involved vast research—in this case, in the United States, Spain, and Syria. (From the publisher.)

## Discussion Questions

1. “Notes About This Book” (xv) gives a sense of how the book was written, whose point of view it reflects, and Eggers’s efforts at accuracy and truth in his depiction of events. By choosing to portray the response to the hurricane through its effects on one family, what kind of story (or history) does he achieve?
2. The book opens with “Friday, August 26,” an expository chapter that introduces us to Zeitoun’s family life and his business life, the two very interconnected. What are some of the ways in which the descriptions here draw you in as a reader, and make these people and their situation real? Why is the timeline a good structural choice for this story?
3. Kathy has grown up as a Southern Baptist. Drawn to Islam through her childhood friend Yuko, she decides to convert. Why, when she comes to visit wearing her hijab, does her mother tell her, “Now you can take that thing off” (57)? Why does the prayer from the Qur’an quoted on page 51 have a strong effect on her? What does her reaction to the evangelical preacher who mocks Islam and says that Kathy’s temptation to convert was the work of the devil (65–66), say about Kathy’s character and intelligence?
4. Do Abdulrahman, Kathy and their children make up an unusual American family, or not? How would you describe the relationship between Zeitoun and Kathy, in marriage and in business? What effect does their religion have on the way others in the community see them?
5. Why has Eggers woven into the story accounts of Zeitoun’s past in Syria, his upbringing, his brother Mohammed, the champion swimmer, his brother Ahmad, and their close bond? What effect does this framework of family have on your perception of Zeitoun’s character, his ethics, his behavior?